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School counselling launches into cyberspace: An action research study of a school based online counselling service

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Abstract

Adolescent mental health in Australia is currently a major social issue. The occurrence of such disorders as depression and anxiety in the secondary school aged population has consequences both for learning capacity and emotional well-being. However, young people who experience mental health difficulties are reluctant to seek help through face-to-face counselling. This is particularly so for boys more than girls. Young Australian males have been shown to have poorer educational outcomes, more incarceration, illness and completed suicides compared with young females. This is happening at a time when technology is an integral part of young people's social interaction. Young people use technology as an adjunct to face to face communication with their peers. They also seek health information and help through technology such as the internet. Sometimes they seek help only by technology. The potential for relative anonymity, which technology can provide, makes this medium a powerful resource for adolescents unwilling and hesitant to seek 'face to face' assistance. These facts challenge school professionals who work with this generation to use technology to assist students who need counselling help. This paper reports on an action research study in one secondary school where synchronous online counselling services were made available to the students. It outlines the process that was followed to implement this service. As the action of using online counselling progressed, the researcher gained insights, knowledge and skills which in turn informed subsequent developments for the innovation. Though the needs of the students who accessed the service were varied, the majority of clients considered their experience of online counselling as a positive interaction. Initial results suggest potential benefits, especially for boys, in incorporating online technologies into the current support methods already in place in schools.

Keywords: Educational counselling; young people; Internet

Introduction

This paper reports on a pilot initiative of providing online counselling in a school context to secondary school students. Although a community service organisation (Kids Help Line) has shown that young people access online counselling for mental health concerns, this is the first pilot in Australia to provide this service in the school context.

The increasing prevalence of mental health difficulties among young people is of great concern in our society (Sawyer et al., 2001). As many as one in five Australian children aged from 4 to 17-years-old have significant mental health concerns (Zubrick, Silburn, Burton, Blair, & Zubrick, 2000). It is calculated that by the age of eighteen 1 in 4 teenagers will have at least one major episode of depression (Kessler, Avenevoli, & Merikangas, 2001). The incidence of depression and anxiety amongst adolescents has profound consequences for their school performance, self esteem and relationships. This is even more pronounced for adolescent males. Young Australian men have been shown to have poorer educational outcomes, more incarceration, illness and completed suicides than young women (Sawyer et al., 2001; Kids Help Line, 2003)

Although there is acknowledgement that young people are at risk of developing mental health problems, it is concerning that many who do have such difficulties are reluctant to seek professional help. Just as there are gender differences in the incidence of mental health problems, so too there exists a gender imbalance in help-seeking behaviours. It has been established that boys are socialised to seek less help than girls (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005). A survey of young male callers by Kids Help Line (2002) found that although nearly half (49%) wanted to discuss their emotional experiences, more often they were concerned that people would react negatively and they would be judged as crazy or uncool. Additionally, they were afraid of being seen as weak and therefore concerned about being teased (Glasheen, 1998). These realities highlight the need for schools to instigate strategies and preventative processes that assist young people at this crucial time in their development (Birleson, Sawyer, & Storm, 2000)

Online technology as a *pathway to care* for adolescents

The internet and communication technologies play an ever increasing role in the social lives of young people in western societies. Young people treat the mobile phone as an essential necessity of life and often prefer to use synchronous chat such as MSN to communicate with their friends (Campbell, 2005). The benefits of technology for young people in particular have been identified as a way of overcoming their 'shyness' and 'paranoia' of meeting a therapist (Moulding, 2007; Nicholas, 2004). Online counselling refers to the use of *computer mediated communication* in the counselling process. Often the use of online technology in therapy is referred to as *e-therapy*. Counsellors can use email as a supplementary process to conventional face to face counselling. This is referred to as *asynchronous* due to the time delay required to transfer messages. The use of *synchronous* chat room facilities allows for immediate and real time interaction. Video conferencing is

used by some practitioners, but the majority of services depend on email, online chat or a combination of both. As such, online counselling is a reality which has prompted professional debate and even development of texts for practitioners (Kraus, 2004; Mallen, Vogel, Rochlen, & Day, 2005). This is evident in Australia where there has been a rapid increase of online counselling services in the community for adults over the past ten years (Gedge, 2002). Though there is a lack of research into its effectiveness, adult clients have accepted and adopted this mode of psychological support. These services are limited to 'fee for service' private practices targeted at adult clients, or are community based health and drug related agencies. The community based youth service, Kids Help Line, introduced email and web counselling to complement the telephone help line in 1999 and 2000 (Kids Help Line, 2003). Since then a number of 'youth friendly' websites have been developed such as *Reachout* (<http://reachout.com.au>) and *itsallright.org* (<http://www.itsallright.org>) which offer email support but as far as can be established, no sites offer synchronous online counselling for young people.

School counsellors have a significant role to play in assisting students who seek help (Rickwood, 1995). Sawyer (Sawyer, Miller-Lewis, & Clark, 2007) identified the fact that though a young person's local doctor is the first professional that adolescents may access, the second most utilised professional resource are school-based counselling services. Moulding (2007) discusses the benefits of synchronous online counselling in the school environment as has been implemented in schools in Singapore. Schools contract the external online counselling service (www.metoyou.org.sg) to provide counselling for students in individual schools. A web search of similar services within Australian secondary schools reveals an apparent absence of synchronous online counselling for students.

Although online counselling offers an effective means of providing services to geographically remote clients (Strid, 2001), it is the immediacy of online counselling within the school setting, where the counsellor knows the local resources and the school dynamics, which makes it a powerful resource for students. The provision of online counselling within the school setting allows for the young person to stay relatively one-step-removed from the counsellor, but the fact that the students occasionally see and at least know the school counsellor by sight, means that the school counsellor is not a complete stranger to them. Additionally, there is more privacy for the student and since no one is aware of the student accessing the school counsellor, it removes the risk of stigmatisation. Online interactions by their nature are often more balanced in the power relationship. Furthermore, both parties are able to make a record of the transaction and the student has more time to reflect on the comments and can re-read the counsellors comments before responding to prompts and questions. The coupling of young peoples' preference for this form of communication and the possibility of offering counselling support online poses potential benefits for adolescent mental health. The challenge for professional school counsellors is how to utilise this exciting and dynamic resource.

This pilot study examines the implementation of online counselling services for students in one Queensland school. The initiative utilised the preference of young people to use technology to seek help and offers an alternative 'pathway to care' designed to assist young people who are 'at risk' of developing mental illness. This

initiative was implemented to provide a more 'user friendly' guidance and counselling service in the secondary school

Methodology

An action research framework was adopted as the methodological paradigm because it encourages participation and focuses on problem solving (Waterman, 2001). Action research is cyclical, where a problem is identified, then reflected upon, planned which leads to action and evaluation and the process continues. Within this methodology the researcher and study participants are actively involved in all stages. This methodology was chosen as it values the experience of the practitioner as researcher which is conducive to successful research in counselling psychology (Mallen & Vogel, 2005). The study therefore fulfils the four defining characteristics of action research as described by Denscombe (2003): practicality, change, cyclical and practitioner participation as researcher.

As action research is clearly not a linear research methodology, there is controversy surrounding the writing and reporting of such research in the conventional standard of participants, measures, procedure and results (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Many action researchers prefer to report on their work by a compelling narrative rather than in a scientific paradigm (Davis, 2007). The following is the narrative of this research.

As secondary school counsellors for many years we were aware of a problem in most of the schools in which we had worked. While our days were completely booked out counselling students, there were many students in the school who we knew had mental health problems who were not coming to see us. Boys in particular would only self-refer to the counsellors for a career session and then perhaps confide in what was really troubling them. This was the impetus which started us thinking about how we could provide a better service which young people would engage in.

The pilot study therefore consisted of three cycles or phases.

- Phase A was the planning and awareness-raising stage which included a focus group of students and many informal discussions with ICT experts, teachers, and administration.
- Phase B was the investigation and development of website facilities and adaptation of existing software.
- Phase C consisted of implementing the service and the observation of use patterns and outcomes of this service.

Phase A

Awareness-raising

An idea often needs to be shared with others before it can be realised. The concept of using a chat room to provide counselling services within a school was foreign to most practitioners in education. Chat rooms were often perceived

negatively, and it took a number of discussions at the school level before the idea of providing a synchronous chat room for counselling was seriously entertained. The logic of conducting a counselling appointment 'online' was overshadowed by many fears, misunderstandings and potential technological difficulties. As is often the case, it is common to encounter resistance to new ideas and change in organisations. For the idea to gain momentum, it was important to 'recruit allies to the cause'. These 'allies' were often found outside the usual academic teaching staff. The young male Information Technology technicians were key players in the process, and without their support, the concept may not have materialised. The importance of these 'outside allies' cannot be underestimated in sustaining the project. Informal discussions with these key people were started and repeated until a sense of credibility was established.

Focus Group

Prior to initiating this form of service delivery, a focus group of five year nine male students was conducted to gauge possible strategies that the school counsellors could employ that would be attractive and accessible to adolescents in general and in particular for males. A number of questions were used to stimulate discussion within the group. Questions were designed to establish students level of exposure to online text communication such as *"Do you use online chat?"* and *"Do you use SMS on mobile phones?"* In order to ascertain their confidence in using online technology, they were asked *"How could we use this to help guys get support?"* and *"What fears would you have about using online services?"* In an attempt to draw out their ideas on how to make the service 'user friendly', they were asked *"What sort of things would attract you to use it?"* and *"How do you think it could work?"* or *"What would you use?"* and *"What would need to happen for you to use online counselling?"*

Three themes were identified from the focus group. The first theme was 'attractiveness'. The boys in the focus group believed the website had to be user friendly for adolescents and the chat room had to be inviting. Suggestions included facilities for drawing, music and game playing. One suggestion to include stick drawings with speech bubbles appeared to the researchers as unrealistic, but in fact as the project progressed, this 'unrealistic' concept became the centrepiece of the project. A second theme was 'privacy'. Most participants in the group were familiar with web based messenger tools such as provided by Yahoo or MSN. The logical suggestion was to implement MSN through the school website. However, as mentioned earlier, this service is blocked by systemic firewalls. The idea of 'private chat' with secure logon and password was seen as necessary to avoid 'abuse' of the system. Related to privacy was the third theme of 'relative anonymity'. Many of the boys liked the idea of being able to talk to someone without having to reveal their identity. However the issue of talking to someone who they didn't know was a barrier for some boys. These boys expressed a desire to know who it was that they were talking to. The focus group findings generally indicated the positive acceptance of using technology to provide counselling and support to students at school.

Phase B

Technological challenges

The focus group was a pivotal initiative in determining the next phase of the pilot. The ideas expressed by the members of the focus group triggered a new cycle of investigation. Making the ideas a reality though required considerable manipulation of existing technology.

Although the researchers could envisage the nature of the online service, they lacked the technological expertise required to realise the concept without support from the information technology technicians within the school. The information technology required was also compounded by systemic constraints and the lack of appreciation of the concept by line managers. As with most innovations, the *inertia* of the *status quo* needed to be overcome. As mentioned, many of the suggestions of the focus group initially seemed unrealistic but as the initiative progressed, issues were addressed and made operational. The various technological restrictions were incrementally resolved and the initial reluctance and concern was in part translated into support as the practicalities and implementation became a reality.

Initially, the school website did not have the capabilities of being managed by the school counsellors and making the links to external chat rooms was not supported by systemic protocols. The existence of 'safety' restrictions such as education department firewalls and filters made 'live' forms of communication a difficulty that needed to be overcome.

An indication that the concept was gaining a sense of credibility was the support of the Head of Department- Information Services who agreed there was a need for a reconstruction of the school website which would accommodate an online chat facility. A website developer was consulted who recommended a dynamic website model. A financial commitment by the school confirmed the project. An important section of the website was that of the school support services. Students were able to contact the guidance counsellors by an email link on this site. Appointments could be made by email for online counselling using the resources of Education Queensland's **Learning Place** (<http://education.qld.gov.au/learningplace>). A project room with chat facilities was established at the **Learning Place** with a link from the school's website.

This technology also incorporated *comic chat* as well as text only chat. *Comic chat* provided users with a selection of avatars from which the user chooses one to represent them. The student would interact in the chat room with the avatar of the counsellor using a 'speech bubble' genre. The choice of comic chat or text based interaction can be made depending on the needs, interests and age of the student accessing the support. Thus over a period of two years, the ideas slowly crystallised into reality. The process became functional and students accessed the guidance counsellors for online counselling sessions.

Phase C

Implementation

The school website was the key to this initiative. Students needed to have access to the school website and an awareness of the available features. As the technical challenges were resolved, new insights provided the researchers with more possibilities as to how service delivery could be enhanced. This included the linking of various youth support websites and other resources through the school website that could be used independently by students. The creation of a supportive 'web surround' for students with high needs gradually evolved.

Students needed to know how to contact the school counsellor by email in order to request an appointment. They also needed to know where the portal for the counselling facility was situated on the website. To assist students in this regard, a message was placed on the front page of the school intranet explaining the availability of online counselling. It became obvious that there was a need to assist students if there was a time delay between the request and acknowledgement. For this reason an auto reply with emergency contact details was built into the system. Once an appointment time was booked, students were provided with a secure logon and password which ensured the chat room could only be accessed once the counsellor was present.

Observations

As the online service was used by students it became obvious that in most cases, students followed up the online appointment with subsequent 'face-to-face' consultations with the counsellor. The study highlighted the fact that a diverse group of students will use the online mode. The use of the service was across all year levels from year 8 to year 12. It was used by students with various impairments and for a variety of issues. Boys were the main users and some students found a combination of face-to-face and online modes beneficial depending on the presenting issue at the time. Two boys asked to chat online during lunch hour about a mutual interpersonal conflict, which indicates a potential for mediation and conflict resolution processes. The fact that the counsellors were able to keep hard or electronic copies of the counselling script for reflection, analysis, and record keeping meant there was a permanent record of the intervention.

As schools are zealous in protecting students in cyberspace from outside intruders, the variety of filters and barriers to synchronous communication between students and thereby with teachers, has made it difficult to implement and maintain this service for students. As students are discouraged from using email at school and MSN-messenger, this also means alternative arrangements need to be made to compensate for the lack of these facilities on school websites. For example, the simple sending of an email from the school website is made complicated due to the censoring and blocking of the usual social communication channels young people use in their everyday lives. As it took some time to promote the service with students, its use was limited by these new technological difficulties.

The marketing of the service has been an ongoing impediment to the increased use of the service. The cyclic effect of action research has highlighted the need for ongoing advertising of the service. A number of strategies have been employed to advertise the service to students through notices as well as publicising the innovation to parents through the school newsletter. The school counsellor also needs to promote

the service when orientating new students to the school and where necessary, targeting specific groups of students with workshops incorporating online counselling. This is especially important when encouraging students with special needs to seek assistance. At times, during face-to-face counselling, it may be observed that a reticent or shy student may benefit from using online consultations and in these cases the student may be instructed on how to access the service.

Outcomes

Due to the infancy of the project, only a small number (1-2%) of the student body (N=1200) accessed the online counselling service. Of those, approximately 90% were males and the issues varied. The potential benefits for online counselling in schools, and the variety of issues that can be addressed by online counselling interventions can be illustrated by the following scenarios. These are based on actual counselling sessions that occurred during the implementation.

Some things are better said through text

“Mary” was having regular face to face counselling with the school counsellor. On one occasion, she chose to go online to talk about her habit of smoking. When asked why she didn’t discuss this in the usual counselling setting, “Mary” commented that she had felt a little embarrassed about it at first. This issue was then followed up in face-to-face counselling.

It’s too personal to talk to someone about

“Ben” requested an online appointment on the last day of term. During the first online interaction with the school counsellor, “Ben” asked questions about sexuality and disclosed that he was same sex attracted. This allowed him to assess if it was ‘safe’ to discuss such issues with the counsellor. He continued with a number of online appointments before he agreed to further discuss this and other issues in face-to-face counselling subsequently arranged through the online process.

I can be like everyone else

“Darren” is confined to an electric wheelchair. His physical impairment is severe. He is not forward in seeking counselling assistance and generally he limits his verbal communication with the school counsellor. However once he was introduced to the online facility, “Darren” made a number of online appointments to discuss his life goals and his hopes for the future.

Can we discuss this together?

Brian and Chad were having difficulties with a particular teacher. They didn’t want to talk about it but wanted to use the comic chat to help them communicate. They asked for an online meeting together. They used the library computers for a lunchtime meeting with the counsellor. They were able to discuss openly what was happening and share ideas with the counsellor on how best to work through the conflict.

I'm not suppose to have problems

“Kyle” was in a leadership role in the school. As such, he was reticent to seek out the school counsellor. However, when his home situation started to impinge on his ability to carry out the duties expected of him, he contacted the school counsellor initially via email. Through this process, a synchronous meeting was arranged and a number of issues were discussed outside school hours online. Kyle chose to follow up some of these issues with further face-to-face counselling

Discussion

Ethical and legal implications

Discussions with educational administrators about the concept of online counselling was frequently focused on the ethical implications and possible legal consequences of the counsellor's ‘duty of care’. The ethics of various professional bodies representing those who provide counselling were consulted and much time was spent examining the various arguments and viewpoints. As the *Learning Place* is a departmental resource it was considered its use by school counsellors, who are departmental employees, was justified. Though students could take measures to be totally anonymous, no student has withheld identifying information. Many of the ‘ethical and legal’ issues that were initially posed by those sceptical about such innovation were not found to be obstacles. In practice, the fear of ‘high risk’ students not being traceable in critical situations did not eventuate. As the technology was used, it became obvious that students tend to provide some identifier which can be traced if necessary. This benefit of action research highlighted how the implementation can provide insight into the concepts being investigated.

Sustainability

The online facility was available for students over a period of one year until the school website was re-designed in accordance of new systemic requirements. Since the website was redesigned, few students have used the service. It is assumed that this may be due to a number of factors including the fact that there is generally overall poor use of the re-structured school website by students. This would indicate that this type of service needs to be widely promoted with students and it needs to be easily accessed through the various school online activities. If students do not see a need to access the school website, they will be unaware of the resources available to them.

Promotion of service

Teachers are often the first significant adult who observes a student experiencing difficulties. For this reason it is imperative that members of the school staff are aware of the online service so they can promote it when they encounter distressed students. It has been found that students need to be encouraged to use the service and the importance of the teacher's role in promotion cannot be underestimated.

Conclusion

This action research study of an innovative pilot attempted to provide an alternative pathway to care for secondary school students. It provided computer mediated counselling within the school setting and as a result of this initiative a number of students, who may not have accessed the school counsellor, did participate in online counselling and most of these students subsequently sought face-to-face counselling. The issues were significant and potentially may have had negative outcomes if not addressed. All students who participated indicated anecdotally that they believed the process was useful for them at the time. It was observed that the majority of students who used the online service subsequently eventually sought face-to-face counselling with the school counsellor. It could be suggested that the initial use of the online facility was to establish trust and confidence in talking with the counsellor.

The fact that the process was not widely known among students has inevitably resulted in only a small number of students accessing the service. This may have been due to use level of the school website by students. The importance of educating the school community that online counselling is available to students has been identified and the potential benefits for students have been highlighted through this action research study. This pilot has indicated that further research into the potential benefits for both students and school counsellors is necessary. The effectiveness of online counselling as a means of providing appropriate and meaningful support for young people in the school setting required further investigative research, though initial indicators suggest it is a worthwhile endeavour.

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